Heritage osier bed – the first year
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Work has continued to develop the allotment plots at Hurst Road but the year has been full of challenges. The project has only been able to continue with a significant financial investment in a deer-proof fence to protect the crop from grazing roe deer.

The two plots were cleared of the superficial growth of weeds including pervasive nettles, couch grass and the roots of the bramble that covered the whole site. The plots looked as though we were raising pigs for most of the time! Planting osier sets had to wait until the chance of a severe frost had passed. The sets were collected in March from the Willows and Wetlands Centre near Taunton in Somerset and it was the middle of April before the opportunity arrived for the planting.

What was never anticipated was a brief but significant fall of snow on the chosen planting day. Fortunately it didn't last for long but it didn't help because it made the ground very sticky to walk on.

In the next eight weeks the sets made impressive growth and the photograph showing a good 70cm of growth was proudly displayed on the History Society stand at the Scouts Donkey Derby on Sunday, 5th of June.

You'll need to look closely to see the single upright stems in the foreground. In addition, a paper was written about the project to submit to the Parish Council for the osier bed to be considered part of Twyford's entry for the Britain in Bloom competition. That idea was short-lived – it was withdrawn in the middle of June due to visits by roe deer who nipped off all the growing tips. Without their growing tips the withies growth was stopped. At first it was thought only one species was attracting the deer's attention and that the predators were muntjac deer. The reality was that it was all three species that were being devoured and the visitors were these bambi-looking deer. That was confirmed in the video footage taken. The deer appear to be lone grazers; there is no footage showing more than one.

It wasn't just the deer that visited the plot. The camera provided a greater insight to the range of nocturnal visitors. The camera would be triggered by the infra-red heat radiated by any animal. There were many shots showing faint outlines of deer but with insufficient detail for the species to be recognised. Foxes were more frequent visitors than the deer but the fox was clearly not interested in eating the willow. Cats would also prowl the plot and on one occasion the infrared light could be seen reflecting in the eyes of a mouse.

The camera was activated occasionally in the
daylight of the early mornings but no good footage of any animals was obtained; an animal lurking in distance was probably triggering the camera. Occasionally a bird was recorded as a blur as it traversed the camera's field of vision.

The search for some defence against deer at a price that we could afford was an interesting but time-consuming task. As you would expect the Internet proved a valuable resource as clearly we were not on our own in this problem. Suggestions ranged from lines of obnoxiously smelly rags to complex hurdles of fishing line trip wires tied to something to provide an audible warning. None of these however provided a guaranteed barrier. Any opportunity to quiz gardeners about their experience was also taken; a high fence was usually the first and only response but the idea of diesel-soaked rags came up occasionally. The most authoritative source of information came from the Forestry Commission's website. Their documentation described the different grazing characteristics of deer, whether they were pushers, jumpers or burrowers. Throughout my early searches I favoured an electric fence because I thought it would be easy to deploy but the complex arrangement of wires suggested in the Commission's information put me off that option. It transpires that there is nothing as efficient as a high fence to meet this need.

Bespoke deer fencing erected to the forestry commission standards was too expensive and in August abandoning the osier project appeared a real possibility. Then came a breakthrough by looking at the temporary fencing that is used by the construction industry round almost every corner we turn. This relatively inexpensive temporary fencing regularly seen on building sites was a real saviour. Buying ex hire-fleet materials, a complete fence with access gates was within the agreed budget; furthermore it could be erected and easily maintained by us. With the Twyford Parish Council's approval the osier bed is now completely surrounded with galvanised wire panels and two pedestrian gates allow convenient access. The whole configuration was put up in an afternoon with three additional days needed to get the geometry sorted on this soft ground so that the erection pleases the eye. Additional ties across the gates have been added to give the assembly more stability and hopefully, a longer life. If the burrowing muntjac deer becomes a problem then the small gap below the fence in one or two places will need to be dealt with. The roe deer were very clinical in their approach to grazing once they had found this obviously agreeable source of food. In the fence photo you can see the stunted growth of the *triandra* to the right of the gate. Their early visits removed all the growing tips from
the crop and in most cases that included the top 6 – 8 inches of growth. From that time on the plants then started to bush-out and grow side-shoots which would make the willow impossible to use for basket making. Of the three species of willow that we are growing the deer liked the triandra the best. Every one of the 128 sets planted was eaten and kept to a very consistent grazing height of some 15-18 inches. Triandra is thin and is the willow used for the basket-makers' finer work. The two other species are thicker and are ideal to provide the structure of a basket or in living willow sculptures. The hybrid red species appeared to stop growing when the growing tips were removed and hasn't bushed out very much. The viminalis grew to full height of 7-9 feet after their initial branching and their leaves were clearly a favourite with the deer. The bed is not the only one to suffer this problem at Hurst Road. On smaller growing beds it is possible to provide cover with wire or plastic cages, many of which can be seen on adjacent plots. The deer attacks were not anticipated in the earlier planning.

The future
With the new deer fencing in place we are now in a good position to push ahead with establishing the osier bed over the next two years. November will see the fall of leaves from this deciduous tree and then in December the withies will be cut down close to ground level into a crown that should provide a reasonable crop of straight withies next year.

However there must be something down-stream to further surprise us; the literature is very helpful in describing a gamut of pests and diseases but thankfully we may have a sufficiently small crop to avoid most. I'm sure we will be able show the same determination and resolve to overcome them.

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